

Dance Department History Project 2010-2011

Transcribed interview of Sandra Allen on November 11, 2010 Interviewed by Susanne Johnson Davis

I've been at BYU for over forty-one years and it has been a joyous journey. I've really enjoyed it. I graduated with my BFA and MFA from the University of Utah.

My chair for my thesis was Phil Keeler and he kept telling me, "Are you not wanting to go to BYU, why don't you work down there?"

With his encouragement I had that plan in mind as soon as I finished my MFA; I got an interview with Sara Lee Gibb at her home. She told me they didn't have a position open, but she really wanted to see me teach. I was eight months pregnant at the time and I remember that class and thinking that the students needed a lot of work at an intermediate level. She didn't contact me but Phyllis did. Phyllis had watched me teach also.

Phyllis called me a few days after my baby was born, and told me a part-time job had opened up and she wondered if I would be interested.

I said, "Certainly." I don't even remember discussing it with my husband. We were excited. We got a home down here and he commuted to go to school in Salt Lake. I was happy to have a job to help pay for his education.

That first year, I was assigned beginning classes—three in a row—then an intermediate level; we were on quarter system. The advanced level was not even taught until spring. The beginners had the most time in class, the intermediate had more than advanced and then the advanced. That was their line of thinking back then. They thought the smaller the mass for the advanced, and they were not thinking of students who had already been prepared off campus and had a higher experience level.

As I taught, I don't know exactly what my approach was. I think E. E. Chang taught me to teach with one eye closed so I wasn't too deflated by the lack of ability in the students to discourage. I don't think I was nearly as encouraging as I could have been, but I sought to change the curriculum. That second year, they were forced to put me full-time because the courses filled and that was the demanding factor at that time. They must have created a full-time position for me from 1960 on. It has been a joyous journey, mostly because the caliber of students I work with is so rewarding.

To see the magnificent changes that have happened over time: It was lonely at first for me because I was the only one in ballet. I couldn't really dialogue with other people that understood what I was about, or what the discipline needed. Except for Sara Lee, who was so busy with so many other things; when Dr. Holbrook came back as chair, she was very supportive. Almost anything I needed or suggested or proposed, she was behind me 100 percent. She helped me reword and rewrite proposals, which was very informative and a good learning experience for me. I felt embraced. I felt everyone at the Y loved me. I felt like I wasn't quite as in my element and it wasn't until we moved to the College of Fine Arts that I really felt that. I loved the training quality of the faculty over the years.

In 1971, I think it was, Marsha Russell joined us at Dr. Holbrook's suggestion. She was a student who had received her BA already and whose husband was working here as the diving coach. She was wondering if I would like some help. It was exciting to actually have a part-time faculty member to work with. I learned so much from Marsha. She's been a great contributor. There was a large amount of time when she moved and lived in Arizona, but she came back to us and we have so enjoyed her.

There were others, some actually from our students that I knew before: Connie Burton Friez and Suzy Satinwood were both students in our program. We brought them in as teachers because of their high skill level. Suzy is, of course, still with us, and has been a wonderful contributor. We were actually able to hire another full time position in 1980. We got Darrell Yeager, Mark Lemini, and E. E. Chang, also a high level part time. She made an enormous contribution.

Mary Anne Hatten also came in 1980 because her husband had retired in Sacramento and was taking a teaching position here at the School of Music.

She fluttered her eyelashes at me at the University conference dinner at the Marriott Center, and asked "Sandy, do you remember me?"

In the masses of people that were there, it was quite providential that we came face to face.

I was shocked and I said, "You're not Mary Anne Hatten are you?"

She said "Yes I am." She said she wanted to take some classes, and of course we let her do that. But the next semester, we hired her part-time too. She gave an enormous contribution.

What a blessing to work with all these colleagues throughout the years.

We also had Shani Olsen and now Robison: a stellar student and great contributor. I've learned much from each of them and have enjoyed being able to dialogue and help it to grow and evolve it into something much better than when I first came.

I worked with all the deans, except for the first one. I remember asking Dean Milton Hartvigsen whether or not I could have a professional company. He looked at me like I was really out in left field and he said that might take twenty years. But I feel the quality of our ballet theatre company is close to professional and is doing wonderfully and has been. It took about twenty years, but it was enjoyable to work with him.

There was also Clayne Jensen, Elmo Randy, Robert Conlee, and our beloved Sara Lee Gibb, and now Stephen Jones in the Fine Arts, where I really feel at home.

The chairs I mentioned: Leona Holbrook was not the chair at the time that I was hired. If she was, I would *not* have been hired. This is an interesting story. I learned it from Leona and also a ballet teacher in Australia who was LDS and was an examiner. She told me she had interviewed with Leona and Leona told her she could not have ballet in the dance department, or the physical education program at the time. Leona said it was too expensive. It just ate up facilities and all of the resources. It required so much more than any other dance programs. For that reason, she didn't think it was valid or could be supported, but I happened to interview when she was on leave and Phyllis was in her place, and Sara Lee pushing for ballet being important for any dance department. I was hired and I am so grateful Leona supported me after that.

I also heard that L. Christensen had been interviewed to be hired here. He decided against it because it was not in the College of Fine Arts at that time. I believe it was he who personally told me that. I am grateful he was able to support me coming down here. Anyway, I think it is such a blessing that I was able to be here and able to work under such fine people.

Of course, after Phyllis, it was Lee Wakefield who was our chair. I guess we'll find out in a few months who follows Lee. It has been a delight to work with all of them.

I've been here since 1968. I can't remember the name of the person that I replaced, but if I saw it, I probably would. It wasn't part-time. I chose BYU because of the coercing of Phil Keeler and because I always wanted to come to BYU as a student. I looked at the class schedule and I loved ballet so much that I was fortunate to take dance from a high school that had modern in the curriculum too. I very much wanted to be a good ballet teacher. I think that was my dream, although I wanted to be a good choreographer too. I wanted to dream and travel the world. There were lots of dreams, but to be able to teach ballet was one that was really fulfilled. That was one of my dreams. I was happy to support my husband's educational efforts. I was more dedicated to what good ballet teaching would be. My methods changed over the years just like the profession of ballet changed over the years.

I have learned and grown from information Dee Winterton brought from conferences and shared with me. I've done a lot of my own research and done several other conferences and seminars focusing on teaching and what is best. Ballet has integrated a lot more conditioning and scientific research so it is not injurious to the body and can be done safely if the teacher works carefully with the students.

That's another delight because each individual body is so unique. They propose new challenges every class, every semester. How can I teach this correctly to this body with these legs in that way? Or how can I adjust and adapt to work for them? It's been a dream come true and a continual challenge.

I think I would have initially preferred to be a stay at home mom. I had five children and now fifteen grandchildren and I very much enjoy the family life. It's been very rewarding. My husband kept supporting me and it was in my patriarchal blessing that I would be given opportunities. He wanted me to fulfill those prophecies in my blessing. He has been very supportive of me being full-time. He has been on the home front probably more than me, raising the children probably better than I would have if I had been there 24/7. We had a tag team relay going on there and he really has been wonderful with the children and grandchildren. Maybe I'll be here a little while, Heavenly Father permitting.

Physical Facilities: I started teaching in 230 RB and we have been in there ever since. There was a time when the program grew and we had to have another facility and Phyllis Jacobsen allowed us to work in the Pleasant View Chapel, which is across from the stadium. It was an old building at that time. It has been recently rebuilt in a beautiful structure now. I taught the first ballet methods classes back then and a few techniques class.

That was a little difficult getting vans to commute from here to there and we lost time in doing that, but it was a start. When we had the gymnastics gym renovated to give us 158, 160, 162, and 164 RB, that was a wonderful godsend, a blessing. We've had room 162 full-time as well in helping to get the ballet curriculum in another studio to work in. It's exciting now to find out that the old laundry is going to be built as yet another studio, and with the new addition in the RB, to have us so close together with Living Legends, and Young Ambassadors, and those MDT classes not having to leave class early to make another class way up in the Mangum building. This is certainly a big improvement over what it used to be.

Our performance theatres have always been what we have here in the RB, or the Pardoe or de Jong on alternating years. It's exciting to use those facilities. They are beautiful. It would be nice to have our own dance theatre sometime too. That would be another answer to prayer.

I mentioned a little of how the curriculum was when I first got here with just the beginning, intermediate, and advanced, with the advanced being offered less than the beginning. I put into motion some revision of that and I think the first thing was to get the advanced levels in the fall and winter as well as spring quarters and then that technique could back up the performing company.

Eventually, in 1980, we made a particularly massive curriculum change. Dee Winterton thought we should have daily technique. At the time, it was a daily beginning technique, and I think it was Marsha Robbles saying that is still backwards. Some of the advanced do it daily, but our core classes up until a little while ago were just twice a week. We would pair two sections to have them do it four times a week, but it was too few students who could do that. Now our 291 is daily along with the 390, 391, and 490. I think we are now really able to build our dancers as we should. We have seen remarkable growth in their technique from one semester to the next.

The one that was daily before, upon Dee's recommendation—the accelerated beginning, we moved back to three days a week and that seemed to work just fine. Our majors still get a firm foundation and we still have our introductory 100 level for general populations. They are a joy to teach too.

We expanded that curriculum with point classes and port de bras classes and of course our rehearsals. We are adding a men's technique class, which is about due. I remember in the early 90's, maybe late 80's, that being requested by our men. We just felt we didn't have a critical mass and we were finally approved to go ahead with it. We are looking forward to that wonderful curriculum change. When we brought Mark Landon in, we stepped up the quality of ballet theatre and the quality of choreography that was offered. A lot of new works, but we also kept our original repertoire and rotated.

Shani Robison is an exceptional choreographer. She has a very creative mind. I think Kalise will be working her way toward that too, so we have great promise for the future. For a long time, I directed the workshops in the summer. We had great recruitment. We had Mark teach at those, and he was a great recruitment during that time period too.

The wonderful ability to add dance to our prefix in 1980 was wonderful. We were finally recognized as an entity and now an entity in Fine Arts is another step upward and better.

Technology has changed over the time. I remember laboring over terminology packets for the students and having to proof the secretary's work. We did not have typewriters in our office and if we did, I would make so many mistakes; there was no easy way of correcting it. These wonderful secretaries would type up these French terms and I would go through hour after hour editing the accents and proofing, then it would have to go through two or three proofings before it went to the students. Now with the computer, it can all be done with a little key, I can go from accents or non-accents. I can master it myself and give a copy to the secretaries to make photocopies. Before, there were ugly ink stains everywhere.

What a godsend and a blessing to have that technology and to fill more students. I never have seen myself perform or dance. I tell my students had I, I would have been a *much* better dancer. They can see themselves at midterm; they can evaluate each other with a rubric and learn so much just from watching and using terms that apply to their technique. I see great improvement by the time they take their final. It's so great to have those cameras and films and the ability to record and replay and then assess.

Some of my big projects have been a little teaching and a little technique. I've done a lot in developing text for teaching. I've tried to develop a tutorial that is still in its final editing stages for the students to access, which is another technological advancement. They can watch a DVD and learn the French term, they can see it pronounced and performed correctly. It's a much better media form than just hard copy of the French term and their definitions.

Of course I'm still working on an Eva Swain biography. She was the first American ballerina in the Metropolitan Opera from 1912 to 1915. Few people know about her, but I met with her granddaughter and researched scrapbooks and newspaper articles. There must be about 400 news articles. We are still pulling that together and trying to further document the news articles.

I think one of the highlights of my time here was the combined tour of Dancer's Company and Ballet Theatre in South Africa in 1993. That was a month long tour. It was such a great opportunity for our dancers. Shani Robison was able to do that tour. It showed such growth and development and validation of what a fine program we do have. I'd like to see more study abroad and tours for ballet in the future.

I think I went through all my assignments. There have been great students from the university who have gone on to make contributions in the field. Several of them are teachers. Some of them immediately in ballet: Candace Taylor, Jenny Kirk King. Devon Lovachavitz is down at the University of Utah filling in as a guest choreographer. Erin Hutchins Malin is teaching school in Chicago. Gladys Sue Stocking Davis, I can't remember the college she is working for, but she is in Texas with her private studio as well. Pam Lyndsey worked for Walnut Hill. Marcus Strada for Boston Ballet—Walnut Hill is in the Boston area too. Andrew Bein is with Oakland Ballet, Nikki Bybee is at Bruno, and there are others in this area. We have some great students who have made great contributions and I look forward to many more.

Even though we don't have a graduate program now, we can prepare them as undergrads. We are so excited to support them in their grad programs and see them in the professional world. It was especially exciting this last July when we were in New York City for the International Corps de Ballet Conference, and amidst all these great international teachers, there was Shani, Kalise, Nikki Bybee, and Gladys Sue.

As we introduced ourselves, David Kerlman said "Ah! BYU wins! They have the most here. They are the best."

Many had taught at BYU or choreographed at BYU for a while, like Malie Falkner. Everyone introduced themselves. It was another great validation, fun for us.

My greatest accomplishment is good teaching. The thing that I have been blessed with the most is the joy of having been here. It has been a real testimony to know that somewhere in God's plan this University has a very special place and even dance has a very special place. Even the people who have contributed to the program for a small time or a long time have been here for a reason and they come as answer to prayer. I know prayers are still being answered and I know Heavenly Father is overseeing what happens in this dance department and is very much in support of the good things we do and in the way we can teach the gospel to others. It's just a great joy to have been a part of it in the time that I have.